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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KUWAIT 001105

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SUBJECT: (C) HOW THE WAR COULD AFFECT KUWAIT POLITICALLY

REF: KUWAIT 974 EXDIS

Classified By: AMBASSADOR RICHARD H. JONES; REASON 1.5 (D)

1. (C) INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY: Reftel examined how a US-led war against Saddam's regime could affect US relations with Kuwait. This message looks at the closely-related topic of the political effects the war could have on Kuwait itself. In both cases, the answer is highly scenario-dependent. If we win quickly and relatively cleanly, and the new Iraq rapidly emerges as a friendly, responsible state, Kuwait will probably come under relatively little pressure to change course, and liberal, pro-American elements may be strengthened. On the other hand, if stiff Iraqi resistance drags out the conflict and produces massive civilian casualties, Kuwait will face widespread condemnation as a traitor to the Arab/Muslim world for having served as our main launching pad. The regime could feel compelled to bolster its Arab and Muslim credentials by promoting more of the Islamist agenda. We assess that the Kuwaitis will not break with us no matter how the war goes, unless they were to conclude that we were about to leave them at Saddam's mercy. Even if the war goes well, though, the Kuwaitis will feel more vindicated than beholden to us. END INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY.

2. (C) PERCEPTIONS RULE: The outcome of the war to remove Saddam's regime and eliminate its WMD programs will eventually make itself clear, but in the meantime, we can expect perceptions to range all over the map, mostly in negative directions. No matter how inaccurate or unfair, perceptions determine reactions. Kuwaitis' perceptions may be vulnerable to change because of unrealistically high initial expectations: they have been telling themselves that the Iraqis hate the dictator so much they would not fight, and that our military might is so overwhelming that we would sweep into Baghdad in no time, with negligible casualties. This Embassy is tracking not only the Kuwaitis' own perceptions about the war, but the effect on them of prevailing perceptions in the wider Arab world. There, if not here, we expect to see an inverse relationship between the degree to which the Iraqis put up a fight and the credibility of our claim to be liberators (never mind that this equation is a fallacy as long as only the regime resists, not the population). We also expect to see (in the larger Arab world, but not here) a direct relationship between the amount of perceived harm the Iraqis do to us and Saddam's standing as a warrior hero.

3. (C) OPTIMIST'S SCENARIO: If the war ends well, Kuwait will be adequately insulated against criticism in the Arab/Muslim world. In the best case, US influence in Kuwait will grow, liberals in this country will be strengthened, and they may increase their representation in the National Assembly (elections are due by mid-July). This optimistic scenario offers the best chance for progress on women's rights (Kuwaiti women can neither vote nor run in National Assembly elections; in 2000, the Assembly narrowly rejected an Amiri decree enfranchising them). However, even spectacular success in the war will not guarantee liberal ascendancy. Liberals are disunited, and they are -- almost by definition -- vulnerable to being stigmatized as anti-Islamic.

4. (C) How Iraq evolves after the war will also affect Kuwait. If the new Iraqi government is seen as democratic, successful, and friendly, the advocates of democracy and women's rights in this country will be heartened. At the moment, with everybody in crisis mode, we detect no groundswell of demand for greater democracy in this small oil-rich emirate. Indeed, by Gulf standards, Kuwait is exceptionally open, with a lively private press and rambunctious National Assembly. Even so, it is not only women who are disenfranchised: most male citizens also lack the right to vote. While Iraq does not have much of a democratic tradition, its women do already have the right to vote, and that could serve as a positive example for Kuwait. In fact, more than one young Kuwaiti including members of the al-Sabah, have told us that they are hoping to be able to use a newly democratic Iraq as an example to spur reform in Kuwait.

5. (C) THANKS, AND YOU'RE WELCOME: We assess that after the war, the Kuwaitis will feel vindicated more than beholden to

us. After all, they contributed greatly to our preparations for Operation Iraqi Freedom and have put their collective neck on the line by allowing us to use their country as the launching pad for this major, internationally controversial war against an Arab state. The relative lack of cooperation from Saudi Arabia and Turkey underscores both the value and the courage of Kuwait's role. In addition, the GOK is providing a very great deal of Assistance-In-Kind to our military. The Government/ruling family will expect us to recognize these contributions which are already approaching USD one billion; and they will expect us to treat them as a full partner. Unlike after the Gulf War, they will not feel a need to make promises on internal political reform. We also see no prospect of Kuwait becoming more active in the Arab-Israeli peace process. Here as in other Arab states friendly to us, the population is less supportive of the peace process than the regime is. The GOK will look to us to achieve real progress towards a solution satisfactory to the Palestinian people (independent state with some part of Jerusalem as its capital, knowing that that would help its standing in the Arab world). We can expect it to play a quietly supportive role within Arab councils if the situation seems promising, but we anticipate that it will remain reluctant to get ahead of Saudi Arabia with regard to normalization with Israel. Financial support for any Palestinian government involving Yasir Arafat would also be a very tough sell here.

16. (C) PESSIMIST'S SCENARIO: If the war were to go badly, Kuwait would find itself in a very awkward position: it would feel great pressure to assert its Arab and Muslim credentials, but it would also want to ensure our continued protection. We expect Kuwait to stay as close as possible to Saudi Arabia, its next-door neighbor to the south, the de facto leader of the GCC and a state that has longstanding strategic relations with us even though it does not share some of our values. (Notwithstanding historical animosity, since the Gulf War Kuwait has become closer to the Saudis than any other GCC state.) The Islamists, particularly the Salafis (first cousins of Saudi Arabia's Wahabis), would be emboldened. Liberals would be on the defensive. The general trend is already in that direction, even without the war. A law requiring classes at Kuwait University to be segregated by gender on the books for several years is being enforced as of this academic year. Plans are afoot to move female students off the main campus, even though they constitute 70 percent of the student body.

17. (C) U.S. RESOLVE: We assess that the Kuwaitis would not break with us no matter how badly the war went, because the more their partnership with us brought heat on them, the more they would need protection, and no other nation but the US will be there to provide it. The one thing that could split them from us would be a perception that we were about to leave them at Saddam's mercy. That would be their worst nightmare (and Saddam's propaganda machine is working overtime to keep it vividly before them). At this stage, we do not sense much live questioning of our resolve, but psychologists manning Kuwaiti hotlines reportedly already have some callers expressing worries about it. Embassy works overtime to counter such notions.

18. (C) TCNs: Under the "Optimist's Scenario," we did not even mention the TCNs who constitute the majority of Kuwait's population. They are normally quiescent; any involvement in protests would jeopardize their job security. The TCNs include hundreds of thousands of Arabs, with Egyptians constituting by far the largest group. We certainly cannot exclude the possibility of subversive agitation surfacing within this community, which could further complicate Kuwait's delicate relationship with the Arab world. Also, if certain Arab governments become excessively hostile, the GOK could retaliate by expelling large numbers of their nationals. (Syria has already made some inflammatory statements; it has tens of thousands of nationals here.)

19. (C) PARTING THOUGHT: The Kuwaitis are the one people in the Arab world whose first-hand experience of Iraqi brutality makes them impervious to the Saddam mystique. The more Saddam becomes a hero to other Arabs, the deeper the rift will be. The more successful we are, the less Kuwait will have to do to mend fences, but the harder certain other Arab states will find it to mend fences with Kuwait.

JONES